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Investigation and interpretation: the traditional and practice-based methods of the Drawing Research Group

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Duck: Journal for Research in Textiles and Textile Design

Volume 1: What is textile design research?

INVESTIGATION AND INTERPRETATION: THE WORK OF THE DRAWING RESEARCH GROUP

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Abstract

As part of a review of research opportunities in the School of Textiles and Design, drawing was identified as being a key subject for investigation, with its traditional, crucial role as a means of seeking inspiration and generating creative thinking being increasingly affected by the utilization of digital applications transforming every aspect of textile design. The Drawing Research Group (DRG) was set up to encourage established interests in the school and to explore drawing both as a topic for textile design research projects and as a practice-based method of enquiry. Several research themes were identified to capitalize on the substantial industrial experience and practical skill-base within the group and the school's unique historical and professional context, and these include the role of both observational drawing and copying in the reinterpretation of visual source material, particularly textile archives; and the creative potential of iterative links between drawing, design and production for knit and weave. Since its inception in 2011, various successful outputs have been achieved through the work of the DRG, including a significant contribution to a long-term study of the role of drawing in contemporary design, presentation at international conferences, and exhibition in international venues.

Keywords

Drawing in the design process; practice-based drawing research; textile design and production

INVESTIGATION AND INTERPRETATION: THE WORK OF THE DRAWING RESEARCH GROUP

Introduction and background

As part of a major review of the opportunities in textile design research, the School of Textiles and Design, Heriot Watt University identified drawing as a key subject for investigation, and the Drawing Research Group (DRG) was set up to encourage established and new research interests within the school. Several research themes were identified to capitalize on the substantial industrial experience and practical skill-base within the group and the school's unique historical and professional context, and the decision was made to explore drawing, not only as a topic for specific textile design research projects, but also as a practice-based method of enquiry. This paper reviews the outcomes of the research of the members of the DRG conducted since its inception and considers some of the options for future work.

The School has a history and tradition of embedding drawing into textile design and many student projects are still initiated through drawing exercises. It also has well established long-term links with several internationally renowned textile designers who consider drawing to be an important part of their own practice, most notably, Zandra Rhodes, who stresses the importance of drawing from observation to the textile designer (Duff 2005), and the textile designer and producer Bernat Klein, who has had close connections with the Scottish Borders region where the school is situated since setting up a weaving center, *Colourcraft* there in 1952. Klein, in his book 'An Eye for Colour' (1965), stresses that the textile designers of tomorrow should be taught drawing from nature, still life and the human figure while at art school and, indeed, the role of drawing in the development of ideas and source material to inform the textile design process is still largely held as central to the student experience within the current Textile Design degree program. Students are encouraged to develop their thinking through traditional drawing methods for textile design such as observational drawing, and the exploration of color and texture, shape and form.

This general awareness of the continuing importance of drawing in textile design was further stimulated by the particular interests of several academics within the school, leading to various initiatives. 2009 marked the beginning of involvement in the *Knowhow* (KH) project, a joint venture with the School of Visual Arts, Reykjavik, with the aim of assisting in the development of a national education framework for art and design in Iceland with particular focus on the role of drawing and textiles design. Funded by the European Commission's Leonardo da Vinci Programme, which supports practical projects in the field of vocational education and training, the KH project ultimately developed into *Knowhow2* (KH2) and was extended to include nine partners in education, design

and industry, with each partner responsible for the organization of events. These included presentations of the drawing and design work of both students and academics, based on visits to Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) and design-based industrial organizations in the various countries represented by the partners. The KH2 project ultimately culminated in September 2011, in a symposium, *Creative Skills Today*, at the National Museum of Iceland, Reykjavik, accompanied by the exhibition, *Drawing: An Iterative Process*, based on the current research of three academics in the school, Alison Harley, the Head of School and initiator of the project; Ian McInnes, the administrator of the project; and Mark Parker, the director of the school's drawing curriculum (Harley, McInnes, Parker & Schenk, 2011). It was against this background of historical and current interest that a research group dedicated to drawing was formed with the aims of promoting new projects and facilitating publication. The DRG was set up by Pam Schenk, in January 2011 with founder members representing a wide range of industrial and academic experience including teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels in many HEIs and designing collections for premier fashion and textile companies in the UK and abroad. (Short biographies are provided in Appendix I.)

The themes initially identified to promote research involve the investigation of drawing in both traditional paper-based and digital studio environments, and explore both historical and contemporary contexts. Both observational drawing and copying through drawing are examined for their role in the interpretation and reinterpretation of visual sources ranging from extensive historical textile archives, to the familiar garments of lost loved ones.

and the creative potential of iterative links between drawing, design

Education

Context of drawing research

One of the main sources of quandary and, conversely, one of the main opportunities facing the DRG in its early development was the complexity brought about by the distinct, yet overlapping, interests of group members with diverse backgrounds and research experience. Furthermore, the broad context of contemporary design and drawing research added to this complexity while providing interesting challenges. Moreover, the differences between the analytical and systematic approach that characterizes academic research with the more intuitive methods of synthesis typifying textile design had to be constructively addressed. Therefore, based on early discussions, a range of topics and methods were adopted to capitalize on the substantial existing research expertise, industrial

experience and practical skill-base within the group, thus bring into play the *praxis* and *poesy* that drawing supports to investigate and interpret.

Part of the problem of understanding the uses of drawing and particularly the uses of sketches and of sketchbooks is that they are 'private tools' (Gilbert, 1998) and in many cases an individual designer's use of drawing is part of a personal exercise, intended to seek inspiration from source material or to stimulate design ideas. This type of functionality can also be found to be applicable to artists and, for example, to Henry Moore, drawing 'is a means of finding your way about things, and a way of experiencing ... certain try outs and attempts' (quoted in Lambert, 1984, p77), or as Rosenberg (2008) describes it;

'When I talk of ideational drawings I am considering types of drawing, and indeed, drawing processes, where one thinks with and through drawing to make discoveries, find new possibilities that give course to ideas and help fashion their eventual form' p 109.

However, designers' pragmatic employment of drawing fulfils more than individualistic requirements. There are traditional uses like, for example, those of recording patterns of decoration or other design formats to maintain consistency and train young designers (Lambert 1984), or for specification for production which, while no longer so common in many forms of contemporary design practice, still have application in textile design, particularly in association with industrial manufacture. As Baynes and Pugh (1981) indicate, the use of drawing had a profound impact on the development of industrialisation, when drawings became one of the ways in which change could be brought about. More recently, the spread and evolving integration of digital technologies both within the design professions in general, and in designerly practice in particular, have led to a fundamental shift in perspective that has still to be fully resolved. Given the reflexive nature of the digital technology 'push' with the design industry 'pull' in a complex symbiosis, the relationship of the use of digital systems to other forms of designerly practice, specifically drawing, remains in a state of flux. As Oxman (2006) states;

'Among the significances of digital design for the design theoretical community is the way that this form of highly mediated design is beginning to evolve unique design methodologies, unique forms of design interaction and unique formal content.' p229

Textile designers have not adopted the pervasive use of digital technologies in the design studio to the same extent as other design professions, although the impact of these technologies on manufacture has been extensive. However, the investigation of the 'unique design methodologies' referred to by Oxman in terms of the use of new and traditional forms of drawing, and the potential for screen-based manipulation for manufacture, forms a substantial area of drawing research. This

broad research topic is probably the one that most represents the shared interests of the DRG, stimulating enquiry about the continuing relevance of traditional forms of drawing like, for example, drawing from observation and copying on the one hand, while on the other exploring the expressive or decorative effects of the rapid and subtle iteration between drawing and manufacture supported by digital systems. Increasing internationalisation of the teaching programmes both within the school, and through external contacts, provides opportunity to extend the cultural background of this research, while the long-term links with the textile industry supports the capacity to maintain relevance. Therefore, the overriding interest of the DRG is the application of different uses of drawing in textile design, as the range of research projects undertaken indicates. Drawing from observation from life, copying for the analysis and reinterpretation of source material, exploration of decorative effects including repeat, and the investigation of the quality of drawn imagery through the interface with digital manufacture are all current areas of enquiry.

Research methods and projects

Apart from the use of established research methods such as, for example, interviews and comparative analysis, it is the practice of drawing itself that is the main method of investigation and interpretation defining the work of the DRG. Drawing for utility, for communication, for decoration and for expression, each such activity produces a huge range of artefacts and relies on an extensive and reflexive skill-base. It is also important to note that, while some types of drawings may not appear to be very important in that they only contribute to a much greater design process, they are significant when seeking understanding of this process. Perhaps more self-evidently important are those that are, in themselves, the proposed outcome for commercial manufacture or exhibition. However, the significance of each and every type of drawing must be identified and, ultimately become subject to investigation and interpretation. The drawn record of group projects in the Research Notebook (Appendix III) provides a representative cross sample of the range of drawing produced since the inception of the DRG.

Given that one of the initial aims of the DRG was to encourage members to publish refereed research-based outputs in support of the school's research policy, at the outset, the formulation of a systematic method of eliciting the views and experience of the members through an emailed questionnaire, provided substantial insight into the informed opinions on drawing and design of the seven founder members. Inspired by insight thus derived, and taking the opportunity presented by close collaboration with textile designers, students and contacts in industry linked to the school, Schenk was able to make a significant addition to her long-term research programme characterising the role of drawing for design (Schenk, 2007). While the role of drawing in graphic design has long

been a topic of her research, new findings on the drawing practices of textile designers provided both an important contribution to the longitudinal study characterising the role of drawing in design (Schenk, 2012), and a basis for a comparative analysis of the two disciplines (Schenk, 2011).

It was agreed at an early stage in its inception that practice-based research would be a significant part of the work of the DRG, and the various forms that this has taken are described below. At an early meeting of the group each member made a presentation of '20 New Drawings' which provided an important basis for discussion and led to some of the new departures that subsequently developed. Several shared interests were identified at an early stage and these have served to underpin much of the work of the group, with the importance of seeking inspiration from visual source material, like textile archives, through the use of drawing, particularly traditional forms of copying, being a theme explored by most members of the group in some form or other.

Alison Harley and Mark Parker explore the potential of drawing for investigation and interpretation, particularly in the copying of archive material to stimulate and inform innovative design for textile students. Student projects were conducted in HEIs in widely different geographical locations representing a range of cultural approaches to textile design and to the use of copying by designers. The two classic textile styles of Paisley pattern and lace were chosen for analysis in the study, each having relevance to both the historical and contemporary fashion and interior markets globally. The research was conducted by traditional research methods with both informal and formal interviews being used to elicit views from a representative sample of textile students in different countries on their use of drawings, and samples of their drawings were recorded and compared. Findings indicate that there is a marked difference between students studying textile design in China, India and Scotland. While Asian textile students trace with a high degree of verisimilitude, students from the UK educational system copy in a more interpretive manner. However, in every group of students the use of traditional, hand drawn-methods was seen as a natural and effective approach to working from the archive to stimulate creative design (Parker, Harley & Schenk, 2011; Harley & Parker, 2011).

As indicated above, where possible the DRG is actively seeking ways to introduce practice-based methods into their research and this interest in the role of drawing in providing inspiration for textile design has been further developed by both Parker and Harley. In an ongoing study, both traditional and digital methods of copying and image manipulation are utilized to explore Parker's long term interest in the 'nostalgic' qualities of historic textiles, particularly those of the 1950s with their significance for *retro* trends. He is particularly interested in the relationship between architectural

and natural motifs, and is engaged in comparing imagery from the classic town square represented in the London-based work of textile designer Mary Oliver with his own interpretation of a similar urban environment in Edinburgh (Figure 4). Harley, on the other hand, has decided to revisit her long-term interest in drawing from flowers to extend her own research through practice, creating imagery which she can then physically and digitally manipulate to investigate new potential from a traditional textile designer source of inspiration (Figure 5). By using the traditional method of collage, including the introduction of fabric to the drawing to develop a kind of ‘conversation’ between a drawing and an ultimate textile design, ‘with the result that the drawing belongs to the fabric and the fabric to the drawing’ (Harley, 2011).

DRG member Sarah Dearlove is also interested in investigating and interpreting visual source material and works with Shetland-based textile archives to provide new information on the richness and variety of traditional methods of weave and knit. Her research programme, which has the working title *‘The creation and commercial production of distinctive contemporary woven textiles inspired by the Shetland heritage and traditional textile’*, has two main elements and drawing activities play an important part in each. The design proposals and projects, through which the study will culminate in the creation and commercial production of distinctive and contemporary woven textiles, are supported throughout by the use of drawing in all the range of procedures typically facilitating the design process. Throughout her earlier work for clients in the fashion industry, Dearlove has maintained the use of traditional drawing methods for ideation, development and specification for production, and is utilizing this experience in this practice-based research. However, it is drawing from the archive that has formed a substantial part of the early stages of the study where she has used a range of drawing styles, including abstract notation and accurate succinct observational drawing, to record a set of complex data (Figure 6).

Both Garner (1999) and Collette (2010) describe the way that designers and artists draw from observation to improve both their understanding of form and their visual judgement, and as Zandra Rhodes indicates, ‘the information seen through the lens will never enter your mind or your eye the same way as when drawn’ (Duff, 2005). Fiona Pankhurst, another founder member of the DRG, has a longstanding interest in identifying and exploring the decorative effects of floral design through her drawing from observation and experimentation with mixed media (Figure 7). She has decided to extend the role of objective drawing to examine more reflexive and responsive approaches, and has initiated a new research project to explore the personal reactions people have to individual garments (Figure 8). Although garments are ordinary everyday objects that everybody owns and wears, a single garment can be imbued with great meaning for those able to interpret it. ‘Clothes

are threaded through the stories of our lives; what we wear providing clues to who we are, where we come from, and how our futures may unfold' (Picardie, 2012). Drawing has been chosen as the language of interpretation for this study. The intended outcomes are twofold, and comprise establishing the criteria for undergraduate projects as well as the production of a series of woven pieces. As a weaver, Fiona is particularly interested in the physical structure of garments, but as a daughter who has lost both parents she is aware of the space left physically and emotionally when someone we care about is gone. She now aims to understand how these complex feelings can be freely expressed through drawing and the inherent qualities then translated, through yarn and structure, into weave: 'the sensuous, sinuous intertwining of things with memories.' (de Waal, 2010, p17). Findings on the educational benefits of this approach to drawing have been presented at conference (Pankhurst, 2012).

Perhaps most importantly, with the increasing use of digital applications in the textile design studio, the group's interest in the preservation and reinterpretation of traditional forms of drawing have taken on a new significance. The exploration of both traditional and digital methods for referencing and repurposing historical material, and the investigation of new iterative links between drawing and industrial manufacture have become key topics. Even before becoming a founder member of the DRG, Ian McInnes was engaged in a research project investigating the creative potential of drawing as a basis for innovative developments for industry-based knit manufacture. In the first phase of this research he analyzed the creative potential of iterative links between drawing, design and production for knit, concentrating on exploring the ways that computer-integrated manufacture, working from the designer maker to high specification industry production, can evoke the spontaneity of drawing in knit (McInnes and Schenk, 2011a). An early trial can be seen in Figure 9. In a second phase of the study, building on that exploration, he investigated the range of expressive opportunities facilitated by the interaction between traditional drawing methods and digital technology by the establishment of a kind of 'iterative discourse' between drawing to initiate ideas and the actual making of knitted fabric. (McInnes and Schenk, 2011b). Using a First World War theme to initiate a narrative between the conceptual and material, even visceral, manifestation of warfare, a series of experimental pieces has been created, some of which have been exhibited in international venues including the KH2 Exhibition described above and Fibremen 2 (McInnes, 2012). In a departure from this established research topic, McInnes was invited to record his reactions at the *Thinking Through Drawing Symposium*, held in New York in October 2011. There, he explored the communication and narrative value of hand knitting when, in a controlled experiment, he concurrently *interpreted* and *translated* the words, phrases and themes presented during the symposium via the process of drawing through the haptic manipulation of the knitted line. His paper

that charts the development of his own research as well as providing a rationale for his work during the symposium is included in the proceedings of the symposium (McInnes, 2011).

Similarly, the creative territory between the translation and interpretation of drawing for production is explored in an on-going piece of research by Schenk and Ruth Walker, a weaver with extensive experience of industrial weave technologies and a long term interest in drawing. By choosing the subject of the 'Acer leaf' it was possible to acquire a rich variety of visual source material including historical Japanese decorative imagery, botanical drawings, photographs of a wide range of species as well as 'in vivo' specimens of the leaves themselves. In the first phase of the project a series of drawings in a wide range of drawing styles ranging from naturalistic to abstract in treatment were produced and a small selection made on the basis of visual variety. Walker then went on to investigate some of the boundaries of weave production through her interpretation of these drawings based on the digital software for Jacquard, 'Scotweave'. A further drawing-based second phase of the research is planned, to exploit some of the findings from the first.

Conclusions and future work

Since its inception, progress has been made by the DRG both in achieving conference and journal outputs and exhibitions of work. However, perhaps most promising is the extensive nature of the ideas and plans for future work, with, on the one hand, the concentration on translating scholarly interest and experience of industry into formal research projects, and on the other, the curiosity to discover the characteristics of drawing that are worthy of formal investigation, and that make it a very effective tool for interpretation of many of the characteristics of textile design. In addition to the several on-going DRG projects, specific proposals for future work include a review of the drawing curriculum for undergraduate students in controlled research environments that characterize some of the drawing research in other disciplines (Stones, 2007, Huang, 2008 & Kokotovich, 2008) and an experimental exploration around the idea of a 'pop-up gallery' to investigate issues of the exposition of drawings in forms that makes their complex meanings and intrinsic value more accessible to a wider audience.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Short biographies of the Drawing Research Group members

Appendix II: Mixed exhibition, *Drawing: An Iterative Process*, National Museum of Iceland, 2011

Appendix III: Research Notebook. Examples of the work of the Drawing Research Group

Appendix I: Short biographies of the Drawing Research Group members

Sarah Dearlove has worked as a freelance knitwear designer in the Fashion Industry and has taught Knitted Textiles to undergraduate students in England and Scotland. She is currently working on an AHRC funded PhD looking at the textile industry in Shetlands.

Professor Alison Harley, Head of the School of Textiles and Design, previously Dean of Design at Lasalle College of the Arts in Singapore, has an internationally-based research record including editing *WERK No:16*, a Singapore-based journal, promoting a vocational curriculum for trainee tailors in Bhutan and helping to create the Centre of Advanced Textiles in Glasgow School of Art.

Ian McInnes has taught and managed undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, and has been appointed as external examiner and advisor for Higher Educational Institutions in the UK and abroad. A successful knitted textile designer in Milan, London and Scotland, he project-manages product innovation topics for the Scottish Academy of Fashion.

Fiona Pankhurst is a freelance designer for the textile industry in Eire and Scotland. For 20 years, she has taught undergraduate and postgraduate programmes at Heriot-Watt University, while freelancing for a London-based agent and working collaboratively on industrial projects. Her drawing research aims to interpret complex feelings about garments into drawn and woven responses.

Mark Parker, the Programme Director for Design for Textiles at the School of Textiles and Design, has produced artwork for leading interior textile companies across Europe, America and Australia, including companies such as Liberty, Scalmandre and Sheridan. He has organized exhibitions including collaborations with Mark Eley, of the textile consultancy Eley Kishimoto.

Professor Pam Schenk has taught and managed undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in several HEIs in the UK and at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Her research, conducted since the mid-1980s, is centred on the role of drawing in design practice and has been mainly carried out in London-based design consultancies and HEIs throughout the UK. It is the subject of a book to be published by Intellect Books in 2013.

Ruth Walker specializes in woven jacquards for interiors. She has designed furnishing fabrics for the American contract market for companies such as Designtex, Gretchen Bellinger and Jack Lenor Larsen, and she was a consultant for Shetland Islands Council.

Appendix II: Mixed exhibition, *Drawing: An Iterative Process*, National Museum of Iceland

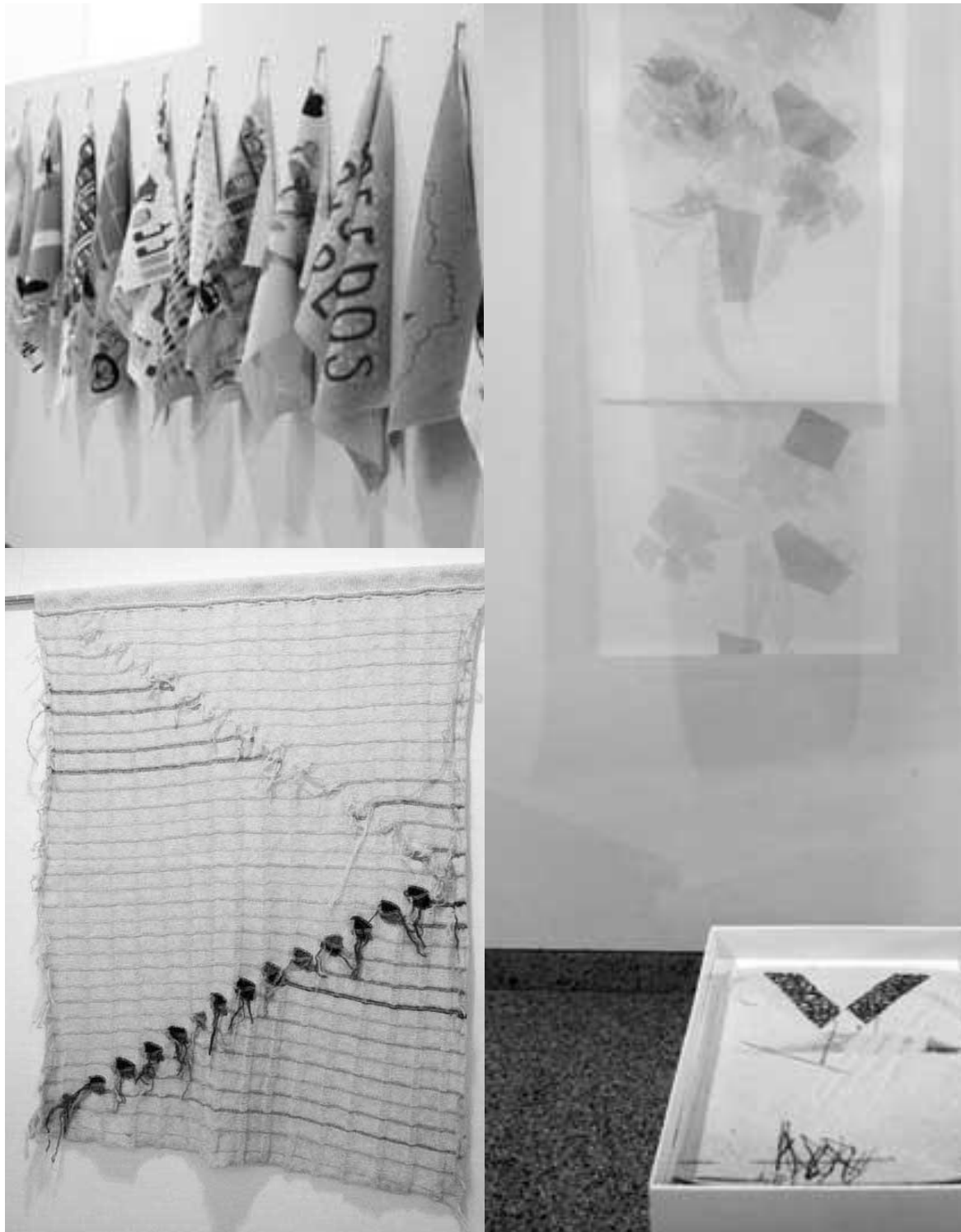


Figure 1 (top left) Mark Parker, *Nostalgia*, 2010. Figure 2 (bottom left) Ian McInnes, *WW1*, 2011. Figure 3 (right top) Alison Harley *Floral Collage*, 2011 and (right bottom) Ian McInnes, *Experimental Knit*, 2011

Research Notebook

Drawing Research Group

Mark Parker



Figure 4. Combining digital and traditional drawing to explore an urban environment, 2012

Research Notebook

Drawing Research Group

Alison Harley

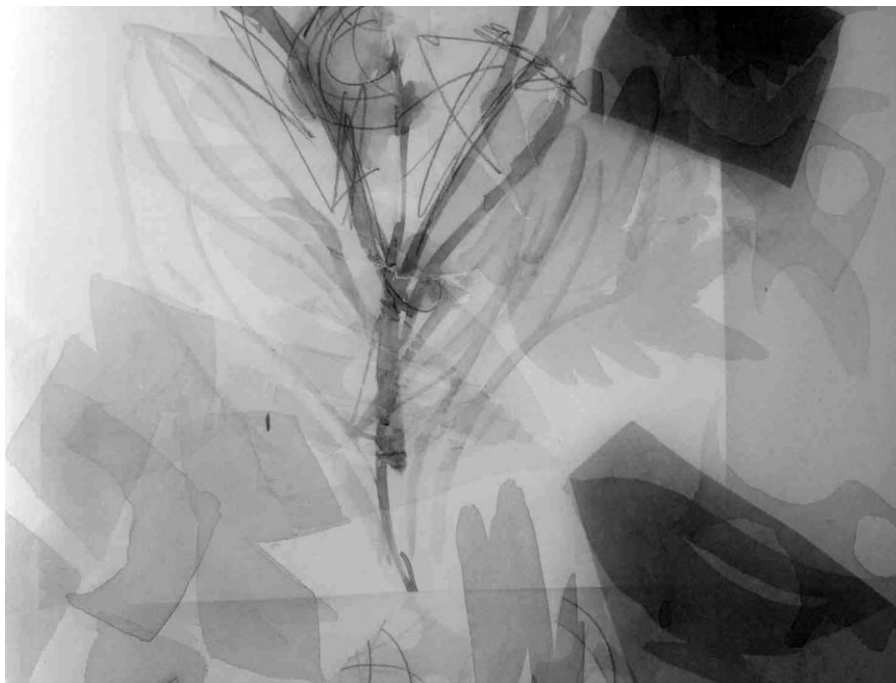
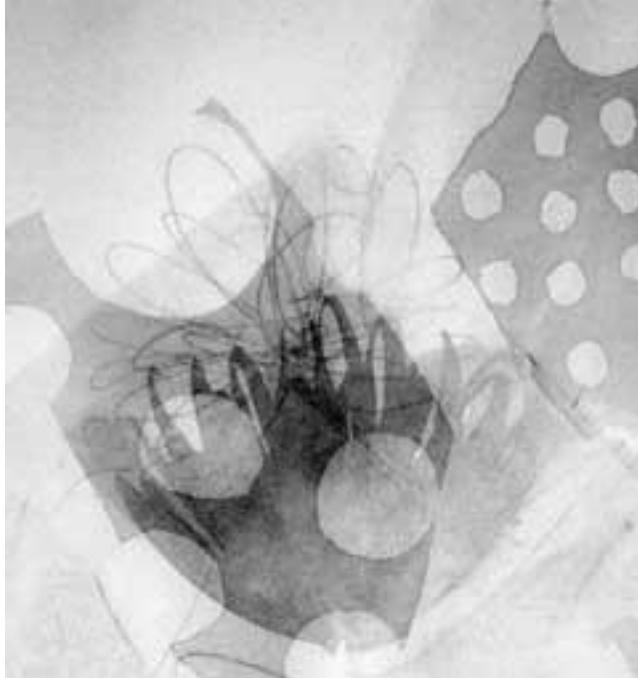


Figure 5. Exploring the decorative effects of overlays, paper and fabric collage for floral design, 2011

Research Notebook

Drawing Research Group

Sarah Dearlove

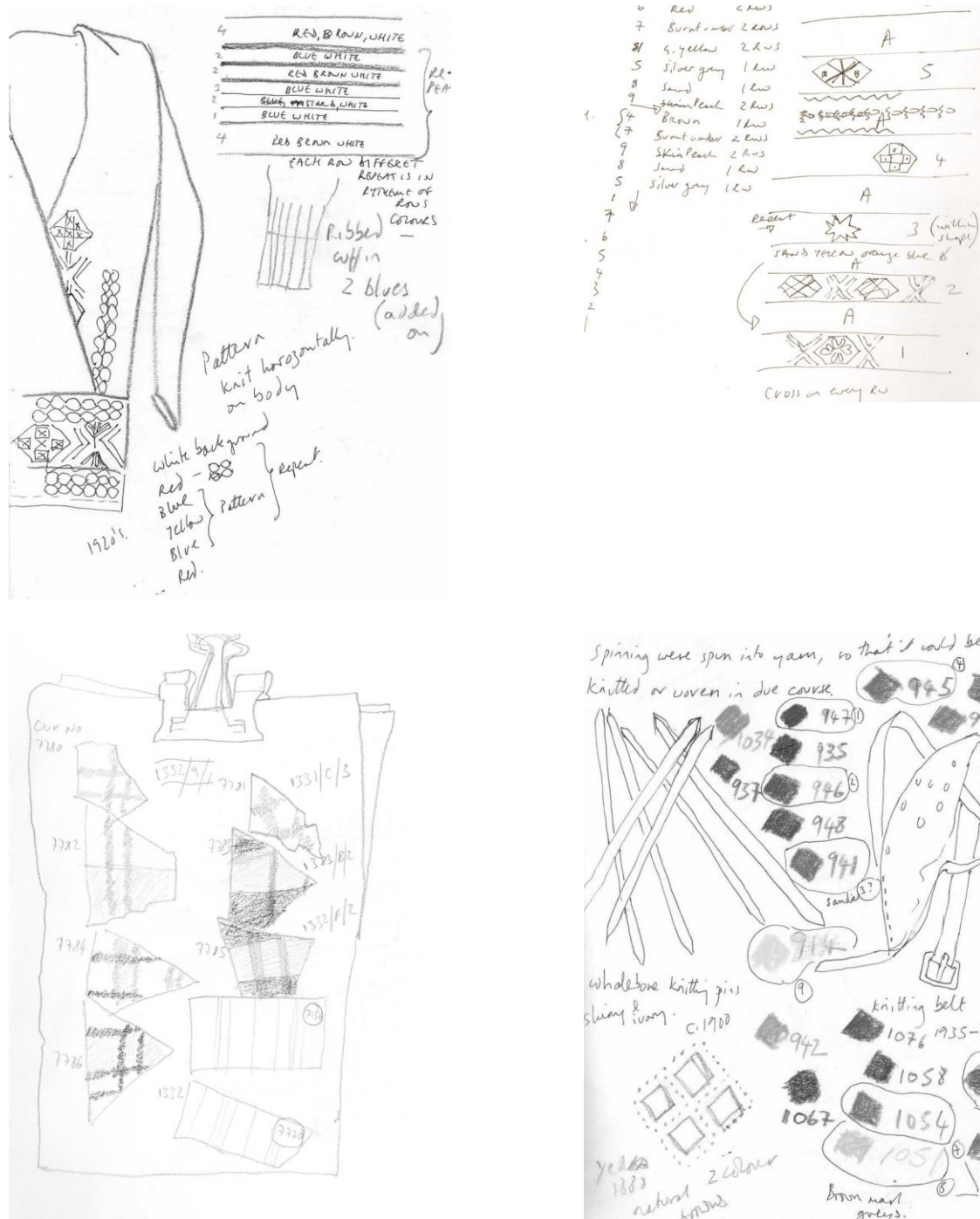


Figure 6. Analytical drawing to record visual and technical information from a Shetland archive, 2011

Research Notebook

Drawing Research Group

Fiona Pankhurst

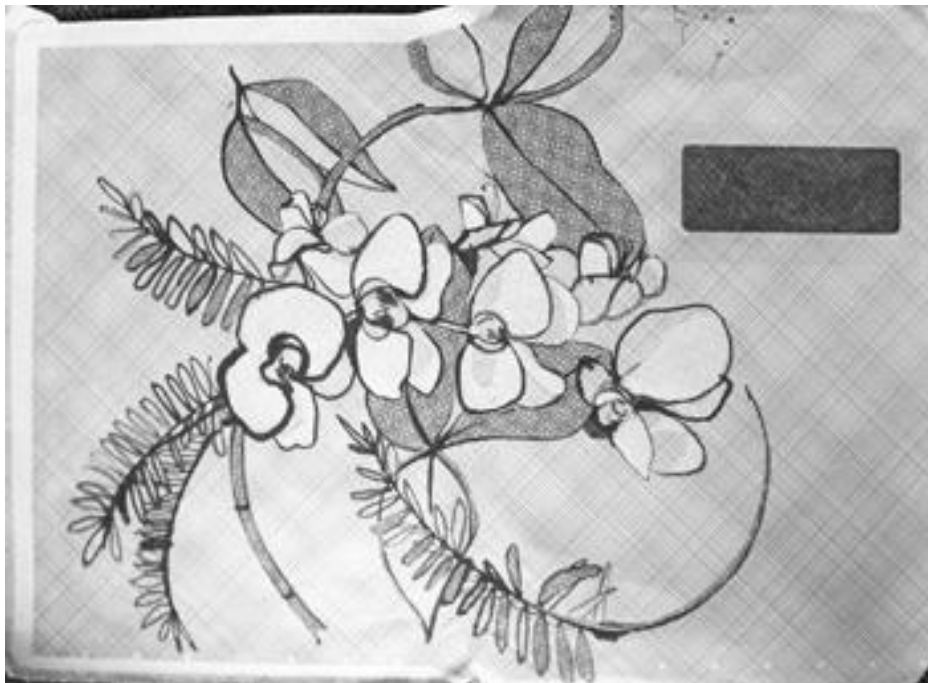


Figure 7. Exploring decorative qualities; pencil, ink and collage, 2011

Research Notebook

Drawing Research Group

Fiona Pankhurst



Figure 8. Exploring the characteristics of a family garment, 2012

Research Notebook

Drawing Research Group

Ian McInnes



Figure 9. Experiments in translating ink to digital knit drawings, 2009

Research Notebook

Drawing Research Group

Pam Schenk

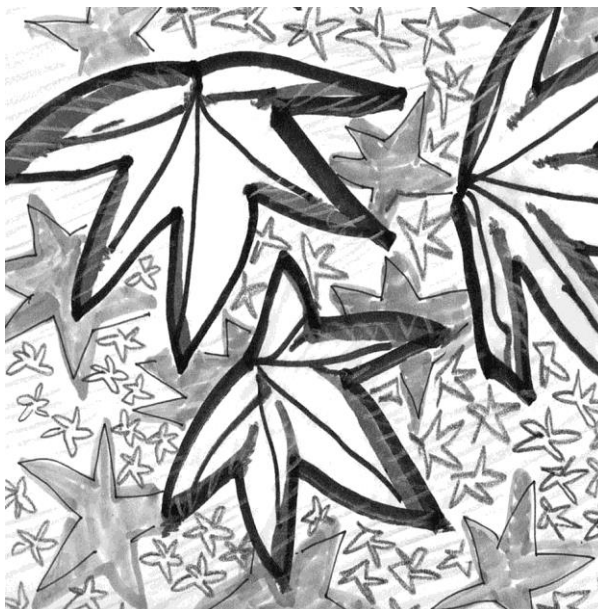


Figure 10. Exploring traditional and digital media for drawing into weave, 2011

Research Notebook

Drawing Research Group

Ruth Walker

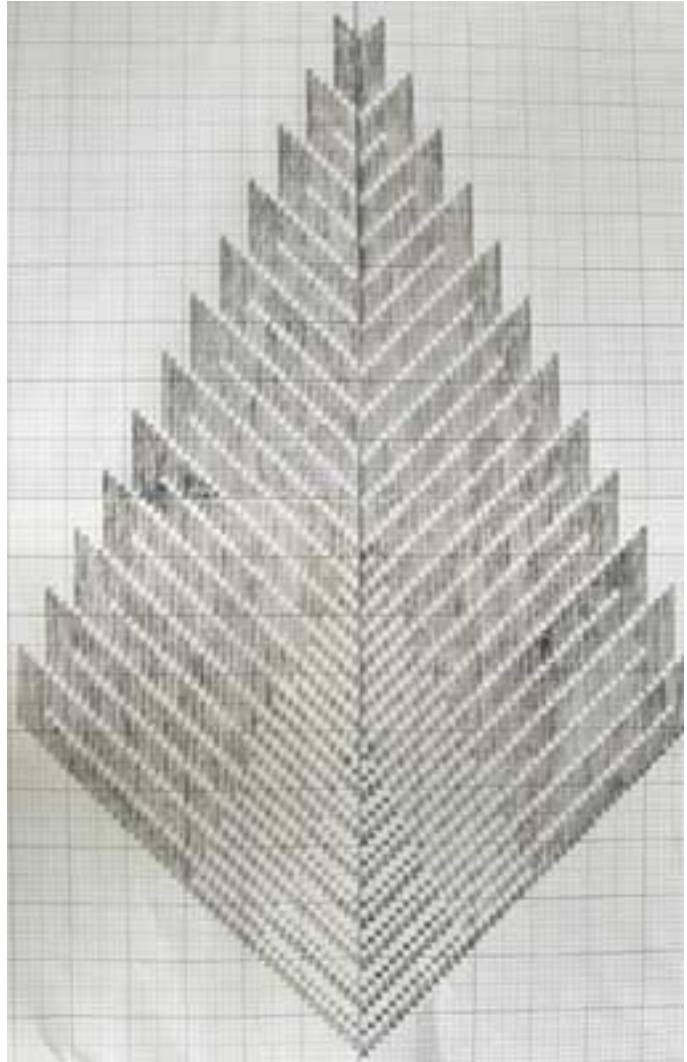
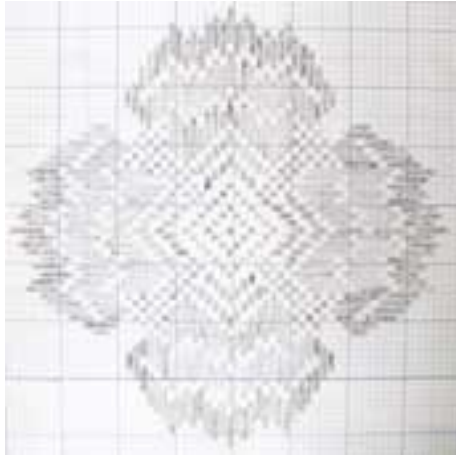


Figure 11. Demonstrating the complexity of drawing for repeat, 2011